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The quilt: beauty, utility, history, identity



Mary Lee Bendolph, Gee's Bend quilter, in her backyard with some of her 150 quilts.

(https://web.archive.org/web/20180703190842/https://www.mtholyoke.edu/sites/default/files/Quilting_Highlight.jpg)

By [Sasha Nyary](#)

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Growing up in Gee's Bend, Alabama, Mary Lee Bendolph sewed her first quilt when she was 12 years old. She used scraps of worn-out jeans, faded flour sacks, even a scrap she found in the road. Coming from a long family line — and community — of quilters, she asked her mother to show her how to stitch. Three years later she had her own child and she joined others in her community, sewing quilts to keep their families warm.

Bendolph has gone on to create more than 150 quilts. She and her community first came to the attention of the art world in the 1960s, when they were brought together to be part of the Freedom Quilting Bee, a collective of women quilters from southern Alabama. Since that time, the Gee's Bend quilters and their works have been the subjects dozens of exhibits, books, articles and documentaries.

Now Bendolph is at last getting an exhibition of her own. "[Piece Together: The Quilts of Mary Lee Bendolph](https://web.archive.org/web/20180703190842/https://artmuseum.mtholyoke.edu/exhibition/piece-together?bc=node/1754)," (<https://web.archive.org/web/20180703190842/https://artmuseum.mtholyoke.edu/exhibition/piece-together?bc=node/1754>) is on display at the [Mount Holyoke College Art Museum](https://web.archive.org/web/20180703190842/https://artmuseum.mtholyoke.edu/) (<https://web.archive.org/web/20180703190842/https://artmuseum.mtholyoke.edu/>) from Jan. 23 through May 27 and features 18 quilts, the earliest from 1965.

"We are thrilled and honored to showcase the breathtaking and highly original quilts by Mary Lee Bendolph here at Mount Holyoke," said Tricia Y. Paik, Florence Finch Abbot Director of the Art Museum. "To match such originality, the innovative installation enlivens the quilts to show audiences

the different ways the artist's work is experienced. Consistent with the museum's teaching mission, the presentation fosters a deep appreciation of objects that function as both art and material culture."

The Art Museum will present several events in conjunction with the exhibition, including an [opening lecture by Alvia J. Wardlaw](#)

(<https://web.archive.org/web/20180703190842/https://artmuseum.mtholyoke.edu/event/i-keep-dreaming-dream?bc=node/1>). A leading expert in African-American art and history who curated a national traveling exhibition of Gee's Bend quilts, Wardlaw will give a talk, "I Keep Dreaming That Dream: The Life and Creative Genius of Mary Lee Bendolph," on Jan. 31 at 5:30 p.m. in Gamble Auditorium. A reception will follow the talk.

On Feb. 22 at 4:15 p.m., [Kimberly Juanita Brown](#) (<https://web.archive.org/web/20180703190842/https://www.mtholyoke.edu/people/kimberly-juanita-brown>) will give a gallery talk that explores parallels between Bendolph's quilts and the writing of Toni Morrison. Brown is an assistant professor of [English](#) (<https://web.archive.org/web/20180703190842/https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/english>) and [Africana studies](#) (<https://web.archive.org/web/20180703190842/https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/africana>) who studies the visual as a way to gain insight into race and gender.

As suggested by these two events, as well as additional programming that includes a musical performance and an afternoon of family quilting activities, Bendolph's extraordinary quilts are objects with many meanings and interpretations, said Hannah Blunt, associate curator at the Art Museum and the key organizer of the exhibition.

"Long before many of these quilts were viewed as works of art, they saw heavy use as blankets for Bendolph's family," Blunt said. "Quilts are hybrid objects. They defy categorization as art or craft or utility. By presenting quilts not only on the gallery walls, but also draped on beds and hanging from clotheslines, we are exploring the many different spaces they occupy."

When exploring Bendolph's work, those different spaces can be seen through the lens of 20th-century African-American life in the south. She was born into desperate poverty in 1935 at the height of the Great Depression on a spit of land on the Alabama River, 60 miles southwest of Montgomery. She has lived through the New Deal and Jim Crow. She watched Martin Luther King drink water from a whites-only fountain — and then drank from it herself — and she marched for civil rights. Through it all, Bendolph's faith, her community and her need to care for her family were all inspirations for her quilts.

In this context, [the extensive catalog](#)

https://web.archive.org/web/20180703190842/https://artmuseum.mtholyoke.edu/publication/piece-together?bc=node/437&utm_source=hs_email&utm_medium=email&utm_content=60252439&hsenc=p2ANqtz--RyY71Fz-psG1i9Cjm4U0UZIkHktnNw-

[jcejwiUkRsemk3lQju7qQkk86KnNw7wyWCgNQMeGDrt9xQclP0f0J77mosww&_hsmi=60252439](https://web.archive.org/web/20180703190842/https://www.mtholyoke.edu/people/lucas-wilson)) that accompanies the exhibition offers further analyses of Bendolph's work, including essays by Blunt and Brown. The Gee's Bend quilts look like no others, per Brown, because instead of more traditional squares they use strips of long fabric, a construction technique from West African, Caribbean and African-American textiles. Bendolph's "Farmhouse," for instance, Brown wrote, "resembles the geometric symmetry of modernist paintings, the tactile specificity of African-American art practices, and the musicality of jazz improvisation."

Also in the catalog is an essay by [Lucas Wilson](#)

<https://web.archive.org/web/20180703190842/https://www.mtholyoke.edu/people/lucas-wilson>) entitled "Whose Quilts, Whose Labor?" Wilson, an associate professor of Africana studies and [economics](#) (<https://web.archive.org/web/20180703190842/https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/economics>), addresses the question of the value of community labor and creation. Ellen Alvord, Weatherbie Curator of Education and Academic Programs, conducted an interview with Rubin Bendolph Jr., Bendolph's youngest child. He and his mother worked closely with the curators to create the exhibition.

The idea for the exhibition originated with the 2012 gift by Renee Conforte McKee '62 of two Bendolph etchings, "Mama's Song" and "To Honor Mr. Dial," donations made in honor of the [Art Museum's 140th anniversary](#)

<https://web.archive.org/web/20180703190842/https://www.mtholyoke.edu/media/mhcs-art-museum-celebrates-140-years>). In 2017, the Art Museum acquired "Ghost Pockets," a quilt from 2003.

As the centerpiece of the Art Museum's Diverse Voices Initiative, the exhibition is supported in part by a grant from The Pierre and Tana Matisse Foundation and the gifts of other alumnae donors.

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Tuesday, January 23, 2018 - 9:15am



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